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AUTHOR Le Page, Robert
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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the need for radical reform in the training of foreign language teachers. This change would provide language teachers with an understanding of the social and psychological aspects of language learning, especially motivation; the nature of linguisitc systems and how individuals create and use them; and the relationship of linguistic system creation to language and usage stereotypes. Thorough training in sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and linguistics should be a major portion of language teacher education. If teachers were equipped to think about their students as individuals within the framework of linguistic and social values and would collaborate across disciplines, then a collective understanding of how to make the most of the existing situation to provide vocational and cultural enrichment for students is possible. Research efforts should be redirected toward this kind of reform in teacher training. (MSE)

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3. An outsider's view of research needs in second language learning

Robert Le Page

I am to some extent an outsider in the discussions of this symposium, invited I think to present a point of view about the learning of languages which may differ in some quite fundamental ways, as perhaps also in trivial ways, from those of the professional modern language teacher. I should explain that the only languages I teach, or teach about, professionally are Old English and Creole English, and that our Department of Language at the University of York is centrally concerned with the light which linguistics, sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics can throw upon learning, and especially upon language learning. The advanced command we require in each of our students of one European and one African or Asian language, and an understanding of Creole, are pursuits valuable in themselves for reasons I shall discuss, but are also necessary adjuncts to the process of understanding how language works as a human phenomenon, and what it means to 'learn a language'. We believe this understanding to be an indispensable part of the proper training of a teacher - although to date in fact widely dispensed with in teacher training. However, we leave training in linguistic pedagogy to our friends and close colleagues in the Language Teaching Centre. It is interesting to us that, working together over the years, some of our own views and some of those of our colleagues under the direction first of Eric Hawkins and latterly of Peter Green have tended to converge in significant ways as to what is of importance in language learning and language teaching research.

This rather lengthy prolegomena may help to explain why I am unable to accept a number of the assumptions underlying proposals for research programmes in second language learning either openly expressed or tacitly accepted at this symposium. I do not believe that any case for research designed to strengthen second language learning in this country will stand the test of time unless it starts by challenging every single one of these assumptions. I cannot for example accept without question the assertion of one speaker, that it was axiomatic that every child should have the opportunity of learning French. Why French? Why a language? What <u>is</u> the peculiar virtue of learning a second language (always assuming that we understand what it means to learn a second language, or that there is indeed any single isolable meaning to such a term)? John Trim wished to identify research problems fundamental to understanding the processes of second language learning, but narrowed his field to public policy directed towards (a) commercial and professional needs for people to be able to handle a second language and (b) the needs of individuals

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to develop socially and culturally. He did not mention the needs of society as a whole for cultural depth and pluralism, and this seems to me a significant omission, since I find the discussion of language teaching and learning in this country still, in spite of the minorities in our midst from Africa, Asia, the Middle East and the Caribbean, very Eurocentric.

Having just (September 1984) spent a month in France, I find as usual that many French and English interact fairly successfully in the tourist sphere, and culturally also (music, theatre, architecture, food), with minimal amounts of any second language on either side. Having then attended a conference at Thames Polytechnic on the role of unwritten languages (e.g. Creoles, Romani) in education, I feel that we should be devoting greater resources and with greater urgency to research in these areas; having spent some of my time in France questioning a French social worker assigned for some years past to work with the Strasbourg gypsy communities, I learn that the larger of the two gypsy groups there all speak three languages - Romani, Alsatian and French - and that while they need the latter two for everyday working purposes they safeguard their Romani identity, and use their variety of Romani among themselves, very assiduously, partly in response to the genocide attempted by the Nazis and partly in reaction to the threat from immigrant Spanish gypsies who have become richer than they are and who speak a dialect of Romani they do not understand. Many of them remain virtually illiterate, French being their only language with a written system. Such complex motives for language learning, language use and language retention are fairly well understood and empirically attested in the literature of sociolinguistics. There is also increasing exploration today (see e.g. Sebba, 1984) of the reasons why teenagers, black and white, learn and use, or try to use, London Jamaican, and of what 'learning and using London Jamaican' means.

But how often do we hear the question 'Why learn a second language?' answered, as far as English boys and girls are concerned, in terms of comparable empirical research rather than in terms of dogmatic assertion by those with vested interests? What really is the survival value, or the interest value, or the cash value, or the self-rewarding value, for such youngsters of learning a second language? What really is the value to their community in having them achieve such a skill? What sort of learning has to be achieved in order to benefit from each of these values? And how much do the answers to these questions vary from individual to individual, sex to sex, age-group to age-group, social class to social class, region to region and from language to language? The teacher's role is essentially an enabling role - but what is the potential that can be enabled? (A general framework for the answers to such questions is suggested in Le Page and Tabouret-Keller, forthcoming).

Such research sounds like the kind of work normally funded by the

ESRC. It sounds as though it must be quantitative. It sounds as though hypotheses might have to be formulated and then tested. Here I should like to enter a caveat. I do not wish for a moment to suggest that research which might help to answer the questions I have asked must be of this kind. John Trim has claimed that modern language research is channelled overwhelmingly into the study of literary figures and literary movements. This is the kind of research normally funded through their libraries and minor research grants by the universities and the British Academy. But there are many other kinds of research which contribute to our understanding of learning in between the quantifiable-hypothetical and the bookish-literary. It is true that in the Autumn 1983 Newsletter of the National Council for Modern Languages in Higher and Further Education the list of recently funded research projects, containing approximately fifty-three items, included only about ten concerned with the teaching and learning of the chief European languages. One of these was a major project carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research, concerned with the assessment of the performance of schoolchildren in modern languages. If we look a little further afield however we find that there are already major research projects not only in this country (work on Punjabi, on Welsh, on Gaelic, on Creoles for example) but also in France, Germany, in the United States and Canada, in India, in Hong Kong, in Italy, in South America, in Australia, in Russia, some of the quantitative sociolinguistic kind, some in-depth anecdotal studies, some laboratory-based psycholinguistics, some general linguistics, some more anecdotally-based or historical studies in applied linguistics. (A fairly extensive bibliography will be found in Le Page and Tabouret-Keller, forthcoming). Many of these throw light on the questions I have asked.

Yet when I read much of the output on second language learning in this country it seems to me highly ethnocentric, highly incestuous, applied linguists citing other applied linguists, very little of it citing work more basic or fundamental, or drawing conclusions from studies in other countries. Quite a lot of research is going on, far from all of it literary; perhaps too little of it goes back to first principles. However, a great deal can be learned about the possible social reasons why children do or not learn a second language and what different things learning a second language can mean, by comparing different communities: within Malaysia, for example, as between Malays, Tamils and Chinese, or between Malaysia and Singapore; or within Alsace, or Canada, or Germany. Much of the information is already available in the now extensive literature of sociolinguistics.

One further caveat at this stage concerns the word 'research' itself. The chairman of the University Grants Committee recently made a distinction between 'research' and 'scholarship'. My mathematician colleagues tell me it is for them a sensible distinction; for me it

is not. I do not think scientism should lead linguists or educationists into adopting it and into believing that only 'research' is 'scientific'. In the West Indies in the 1950s I became concerned that low levels of achievement in the Cambridge Overseas and London GCE English Language examinations debarred so many children from any hope of further education or economic advance (see Le Page, 1968). The linguistic survey which we started, funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, had as its aim the enlightenment of us all about the linguistic problems confronting West Indian children. Among other objectives we decided on a descriptive grammar, phonology and lexicon of the vernacular of each island. The work involved fieldwork, work in libraries, the investigation of many unfamiliar African languages and English dialects, the writing of a preparatory historical study of the slave trade to Jamaica, the careful acoustic analysis of tape-recorded material, linguistic analysis and the slow formulation and reformulation of appropriate linguistic theories. It would be quite impossible in all this to draw a line between 'scholarship' and 'research'. It seems to me that many teachers of languages would be in a position to make careful and acute observations on the pupils they teach, combining 'scholarship' and 'research' and contributing a great deal to answering the questions I have asked, had they had the appropriate training; very often few resources are required except time and patience and the necessary skills. We know, of course, that calls on the time of teachers are enormous; perhaps among the causes a symposium of this kind could adopt are those of adequate teacher preparation, and considerable extension of part-time release for empirical research in the achievement or non-achievement of pupils.

One area of quite fundamental research which is becoming of increasing interest to some sociolinguists in this country and is bound to be of great importance eventually to teachers, is concerned with what is meant by such terms as 'a language', 'native language', 'standard language' and 'correct language', and how such concepts have come into existence in different communities; how their meaning differs from one community to another; how the idea of 'correct language' is applied prescriptively in different communities, and how what is taught in the classroom and examined in the examination system relates to the vernacular, to the language the teacher actually uses, and to the written language. Relating all this to the classroom teaching of second languages requires a distinction to be made between teaching a language as a subject, and as an object, and distinguishing between various meanings of the term 'language X'. In diglossic situations, languages are commonly studied as 'objects' - that is, there is a body of scripture, of texts, of grammar, lexicon, literature to be studied, and on which students are examined. To teach a language as a subject, as one teaches mathematics as a subject, on the other hand is to teach command of a tool which can then be used and developed for other purposes - to talk about things, discuss propositions, write verse. I believe this distinc-

tion to be essential and fundamental to the discussion of second language learning and teaching.

It is very difficult to argue convincingly a blanket case for the peculiar value in the school curriculum of learning a second language. I have already made the distinction between value to the community and value to the individual. If one considers the former first, it may well be that the needs of the community are best met by a highly élitist approach, the training of a select band of translators and interpreters, such as used to be the case in Britain. Singapore may be compared with Malaysia in this respect: Singapore has gone steadily more and more away from English as a second language towards all-out English-medium education in the interests of economic survival, replacing the Chinese-medium schools in which English was taught as a 'subject' (more often, as an object) with English-medium. The Chinese-medium Nanyang University has been absorbed into the English-medium National University. At the same time the Government promotes the learning and using of Mandarin instead of their southern Chinese dialects in the interests of political unity among the Chinese population and of possible future relations with China. The programme, pushed through with characteristic speed and efficiency, has nevertheless demanded very considerable financial resources, the importation of many native speakers of English, and the total sacrifice of the vernaculars. One result has been a widespread complaint, echoed at Government level, that young people lack any sense of the traditional moral values of their own vernacular cultures. Malaysia on the other hand has pursued Malay-medium education for all in the interests of the political and cultural hegemony of the Malays and the redistribution of wealth, formerly concentrated in the hands of the Chinese; English is taught as a subject, but many Malay students fail to gain sufficient command of it to read books in English, so that university courses depend very heavily upon the circulation of lecture notes translated into Malay by professional translators. The top commercial and industrial jobs in Malaysia nevertheless still demand a command of English. As a result, Malaysia spends a great deal of money on an élitist programme of sending some favoured pupils abroad - to England, America, Singapore or Australia - for their education. These Malays then form a very privileged middle class in their own country. Educational planning in terms of supposed national needs is notoriously difficult, and the claims made from time to time that Britain's export trade with EC countries would be greatly facilitated by the compulsory study of a second language by all children have not only to be substantiated (as against the alternative of training small numbers to a high pitch of effectiveness) but must be set against the possibility of wasted time, wasted resources and boredom in increasingly hard-pressed schools. It is worth remembering that Britain has a long and strong tradition of wholly vernacular education for the majority of pupils; that timetables are crowded; that teaching a second language for just a few hours a week when the child has no

other contact with it is very often a waste of time if one is aiming at a command of the language rather than some knowledge about it, and that there is something to be said for the Malaysian kind of solution in purely economic terms. We might close down most second-language programmes in this country as quite ineffectual and send small élites abroad for their education instead.

If one considers value for the individual, again many time-honoured claims must be looked at rather carefully. It is true that to learn the linguistic structure of a second language enhances one's understanding of the nature of the more universal properties of linguistic systems - but only if the teaching is done by somebody capable of drawing the illuminating references. Few language teachers have been trained to do so. It is true that to read the literature of another culture may enhance one's understanding of the properties of mankind and of human existence - but only if one has achieved a sufficient command of the language to penetrate the literature deeply. We get many students at York who are fugitives from the study of French or German literature, having been so badly taught at school; and most schoolchildren get nowhere near that command of a second language needed to read the literature with penetration and pleasure. They would do far better to read it in translation, as the virtually monolingual Shakespeare read Plutarch's Lives by courtesy of Lord North. It is perhaps true that everybody should benefit by having the opportunity to encounter cultures other than their own, although the effect is often to reinforce prejudice if the individual feels threatened by the alien culture; but there are many ways of penetrating other cultures, and although a knowledge of the language is an invaluable ancillary to most of these it is not always a sine qua non, while on the other hand a former member of the staff of the Language Teaching Centre at York who spoke fluently six languages used to comment sadly that he was illiterate in all six. I believe it to be true that some people become fluent in another language because by doing so they can express a persona in some way more satisfactory to them than that they can express in their first language; it may well be that language learning as an activity has a general therapeutic value for some people, and we find that our students in the Language Department at York tend to fall into three main groups, one of which is of those who simply enjoy learning new languages (the others being those who enjoy the more abstract aspects of linguistics, and those who become most interested in the social and psychological aspects of language; there is a fourth, small group who have primarily a historical, philological, probably etymological interest, and who are specially catered for). It is sometimes claimed that the need to translate forces one to re-examine one's own language, and so sharpens one's logic; but one can be trained through logic and through practical criticism directly to re-examine one's language - it does not have to depend upon the activity of translation, and a good deal of actual translation only blurs distinctions inherent in the original.

I have argued elsewhere that people create the patterns for their linguistic behaviour so as to resemble those of the group or groups with which from time to time they wish to identify; and this general hypothesis (Le Page, 1980) is intended to apply to all language learning, including second language learning. This means that each individual is going to have his or her own reasons for learning or not learning, using or not using a particular form of language; but one's ability to carry out these acts of identity is constrained by factors which come under one of four heads: one's ability to identify groups as models; one's access to them, and ability to analyse their linguistic systems; one's motivation - usually complex, leading one to aversive as well as to imitative behaviour, or to partial distancing from the model; and one's ability to change one's behaviour - a factor usually related to age, though it may well be a complex of age and sex and past experience. In order to understand the responses of particular pupils to second language teaching it is necessary to have some understanding of the way these constraints may operate; the group or model will be different for each child, the degree of access different, the motivation different. But within such an understanding there is, it seems to me, great scope for teachers to undertake research with their pupils - always provided, I repeat, that they have had the appropriate training.

In short, I am doubtful whether there is a need for vast research programmes into the need for modern language teaching; I am arguing however that there is an urgent need for radical reform in teacher training to provide teachers with the skills which will enable them to understand far better both the social and psychological aspects of language learning (especially questions of motivation), the nature of linguistic systems and the way we as individuals create them and use them, and the relationship of that creation and use to the stereotypes we have about 'language', 'languages', 'good language speakers' and 'correct use'.

A good, thorough training in sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and linguistics should be a major part of the professional equipment of every language teacher (whether first, second or any other language). Our close contacts with a number of schools to which we send our York students in their second year to study various kinds of linguistic deprivation continue to leave me appalled at the sheer ignorance of most teachers in these areas. Language teachers continue to be far too obsessed with getting on the latest pedagogical bandwagon; they are not equipped to make dispassionate appraisals for themselves of claims made, nor to make dispassionate appraisals of the motives and potential of individual students, who may want very different things from a language course. The teachers of different languages - including English at one end of the spectrum, French and German in the middle, and Punjabi or Bengali or Finnish or Modern Greek at the other end - often seem unable or at least unwilling to collaborate in common language awareness programmes so as

to maximise limited resources and time available for good language work. There is much better collaboration across the syllabus in some primary schools.

If teachers were equipped to sit down and think about their students as individuals within the framework of values I have mentioned above - if they would use their new training, their experience, their own classrooms and their natural powers of observation to face facts rather than to rationalise what they would wish to be true - if they would collaborate across disciplines - then it might be possible to reach a collective understanding of how to make the most of our social situation and what it offers in terms both of vocational value and of cultural enlargement for our students, and to fit language learning and learning about language into that understanding. But how do we manage to change teacher training? There's certainly scope for action-directed research there.

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